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Delia Albert [Philippines, Secretary of Foreign Affairs]

Delia Albert

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Interviewee: **DELIA ALBERT**

Interviewer: Donna Cheng

Date: 5 May 2017

Location: Singapore

00:00:20

Donna Cheng

Delia, thank you so much for coming and being part of Digital Narratives of Asia. So, you have had an outstanding career. You have been held in high regard, and you still are you know.

00:00:30

Delia Albert

Oh! I didn't know!

00:00:31

Donna Cheng

By international world leaders, of course, you are. So, I'll like to find out, were there any particular mentors, that influenced your idea of leadership, and the way you have carried yourself for all these years.

00:00:44

Delia Albert

I think it's an old story to say that my mother was a very strong influence in my life. She was a determined woman, and even the spacing of her children was regulated. So, I got used to playing according to rules, and it was an early stage in my life that I felt, hey, things work if you do things according to plan, according to your thoughts about doing things right. In a way, she was like a missionary to all her children, and I think it set a very strong impact on all of us. When we get together as siblings, we always talk about how regulated our lives were. But it was good.

00:01:32

Donna Cheng

So, it's about planning? You think being a good leader is about planning and, and just thinking in advance, and putting in place?

00:01:39

[Delia Albert](#)

It's about planning, but it's also I think building so much credibility in yourself, that you can rally people around you. My mother rallied us very quickly when we realised that what she was saying was quite alright, and that the children could follow, planning and in a way it's kind of a discipline. But again, leadership should be about being able to get people to rally with you, to be with you. You must have the credibility to do things, and that you're able to do what you want other people to do, that you yourself can deliver what you expect other people to deliver.

00:02:25

[Donna Cheng](#)

So, you're a very hands-on person, would you say? A very hands-on kind of leader?

00:02:29

[Delia Albert](#)

Yes, sort of. People sometimes resent that, but in a sense, it makes people feel that they are confident that... they can do it along with you, because you are with them. I think those are elements that's important. I remember having all my staff at DFA (Department of Foreign Affairs), I instituted a practice to talk to everyone as much as I can. In the long term, people come back to tell me, I remember what you said twenty years ago, thirty years ago. I said, "Oh. What did I say?" It's being able to share who you are, and what you expect from them.

00:03:18

[Donna Cheng](#)

When you talk about rallying people as a leader, your credibility, spending time with people, a lot of it takes a lot of time to build up as well, right? So, how do you think in your career, like was it planned, all these steps? Or did things fall into place, because you just kept doing what you felt you should do at that point in time?

00:03:44

[Delia Albert](#)

Perhaps it's both. It was a bit of planning, and a bit of following your instincts sometimes. When I was asked by some students, how I got there, and how I broke the glass ceiling. I said, "You know, I had five steps in my life, in retrospect." I said, "First, I had a dream. I dreamt that I could see the world." Second, then I said, "If I have a dream, I must have that

great desire to achieve the dream." So, that was dream, desire, and I said, "Then I must follow a certain direction." So, that was direction. When I got to direction means going to the right school, going to study the right subject. Then there were hurdles along the way like anything else, and that things that you don't expect come true. But I said, "I'm determined to get there." So, dream, desire, direction, determination. When I got there, I served with dedication. That's the story of my career.

00:04:50

[Donna Cheng](#)

When did that dream start?

00:04:51

[Delia Albert](#)

Very early on. My mother was such an avid reader. She never allowed us to go to the movies until we have read the books that she wanted us to read. It was kind of a disciplined life.

00:05:04

[Donna Cheng](#)

That's good!

00:05:05

[Delia Albert](#)

I owe it to her that whenever I read books, I remember how I started off, seeing and sort of dreaming about the world through the books. I have kept those books. It's really... everybody in the family read it. It was a Book of Knowledge. I remember all the pictures, most of the pictures I saw of places I wanted to see. So it started very early.

00:05:31

[Donna Cheng](#)

So, from your dream, you moved on, right? You talked about, what's the next one?

00:05:35

[Delia Albert](#)

Desire.

00:05:36

[Donna Cheng](#)

Desire. So how did you have that desire?

00:05:38

[Delia Albert](#)

Desire when I read about people who go around the world and seeing the world. In one of the books, I was looking at the word “diplomacy”. It’s funny, but people tell me, “So early on?” Yes, I was attracted by it.

00:05:52

[Donna Cheng](#)

By the word “diplomacy”?

00:05:54

[Delia Albert](#)

Yes, by the word ‘diplomacy’. I thought it was a very nice word. There was another word that I liked, which was “journalism.”

00:06:02

[Donna Cheng](#)

Ah, yes. Then, you could have gone either way

00:06:04

[Delia Albert](#)

Yes. That attracted me. I could have gone either way.

00:06:06

[Donna Cheng](#)

So, what got you into diplomacy?

00:06:08

[Delia Albert](#)

When I entered the university, I knew I was going to take either the course for diplomacy, which was a bachelor's degree in foreign service, or journalism. They were quite related,

but then I opted for foreign service because of the number of history subjects that were in there. So, when I finished my university's education, I thought I was ready to face the world. That's not true. There's a lot of hurdles to face. Number one, they say, "You're underage, you cannot take the exam." So, what did I do? I was very lucky. I was nominated by my university to go to Japan to attend an international student's seminar. So that even intensified my interest to go about the world and talking about my country and meeting other people. I stayed four years in Japan. I learned Japanese language. When I returned to the Philippines, I said, "Now I'm going to make use of these languages." I had a very, very good start. I was very lucky when I entered the foreign service. All because it's being at the right time, the right place, the right people but with the right credentials.

00:07:32

[Delia Albert](#)

When I was asked by my university to introduce the Foreign Minister at a student's gathering, I said, "Oh, what a dull background he has. I have to do something about it." So, I went up stage, and I introduced him first in English, and then I spoke French, and then Japanese. This was the late '60s, people didn't... imagine, people thinking three languages, which I did. When I came down from the stage, he came to me, and he said, "I need someone like you, who will work in my office, who can say no in different languages." [Laughter] So, that was my big break.

00:08:15

[Donna Cheng](#)

But when you think of diplomacy, you would hardly think of that, that you need to have that spunk, you need to be spontaneous. Somehow you think of foreign service as...

00:08:24

[Delia Albert](#)

Because you're relating with people, not just countries, with people. I realised when I went to Japan that you have to be more or less, outspoken. Nobody will really ask you. People are very shy towards each other. You have to volunteer. You'll be surprised how you will discover not just yourself, but the others, when you start opening a conversation, when you start asking questions. Diplomats, in general, should be asking questions all the time.

00:09:03

[Donna Cheng](#)

Were there people that you worked with, people that you look back now, and you realised, you stood on their shoulders too. There were people I'm sure, who shaped you and helped you. Could you name some of them perhaps?

00:09:14

[Delia Albert](#)

One of them was Helena Benitez. I don't know if you have ever heard of her. She is such a... she's been an educator all her life. She would be a girl scout, sitting with us, tying all these knots. Next thing you know, she's talking to the commission on status of women in New York. These women didn't bother what, if it's a small thing, or a big thing. They... it had to be done and done in a way that you're sharing who you are, and your experiences. Then there was a wonderful Senator Shahani, whom I worked with all my life. She recently passed away. She and I worked on the Commission on the Status of Women on the Declaration of Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which was drafted by colleagues of mine. Today I see the impact of this.

00:10:09

[Donna Cheng](#)

When you talk about women's issues, you have been a champion, and you still are a champion. What is it that got you started in this area? Or did you face some hurdles at the start of your career that made you said, "This is something that I'm going to take on?"

00:10:26

[Delia Albert](#)

Oh yes. I had a big hurdle in my career. I didn't, I mean honestly, I didn't feel any discrimination being a woman, when I entered the foreign service. I believe in taking examinations. But when it came to my decision to get married, I realised that all the women diplomats in the Philippines foreign service had to resign when they would marry someone who was not from the same country as the Philippines. However, the men diplomats were allowed to marry anyone they pleased. I said, "This is not right." So, I went to research, and I found out twenty-one male colleagues married twenty-one women from different nationalities, including the Foreign Minister. I said, "What will make me different from the rest? Why is it that my colleagues, my women colleagues, lady colleagues, all who wanted to marry a Singaporean, a Malaysian, they all had to resign?" I said, "I'm not going to do that. I'm going to challenge it." I did, and I won. It was blatantly discrimination.

00:11:45

[Donna Cheng](#)

How did you challenge that?

00:11:46

[Delia Albert](#)

Oh dear! It is a long tedious process. We were told to write two letters - letter of permission to marry, and a letter of resignation.

00:11:57

[Delia Albert](#)

The men would be answered, "Thank you for your letter for permission to marry. You are allowed to marry." For the women, "Thank you for your letter of resignation. You are allowed to resign." It was a very tricky way, so that they couldn't be perhaps legally charged for discrimination, or whatever. I said, "No, I am not going to write a letter of resignation." Why should I? What I'm asking is a permission to marry, so that I comply with your rule. It's not even a law, it's just a house rule. Of course, one has to think of it this were, in those days, the Cold War was on. Perhaps it had some implications. But I said, "Cold War? Somebody married a Russian. Somebody married an Eastern European. What, where's the Cold War in this?" So, one argument after the other, I had to knock down. I said to the Board of Foreign Service, which decides on this, I said, "Look, you're not putting in me in the agenda. I'm going to take you to the United Nations, because we ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, and I have it all in my favour. Sorry for you, guys. It's not going to be easy for you." Then somebody said, "Delia, you're too combative on this. Take it the other way." I said, "What?" "Talk to people, talk to people." So, I said, "Who should I talk to?" He said, "Talk to the wife of the Foreign Minister, she's an American." So, I talked to her, I said, "Bethday (transliteration), you know there are these issues?" She said, "Yes, I have heard about it. That's awful." I said, "Yes, it's terrible. You're allowed to marry the Foreign Minister. I'm not allowed to marry my German fiancé." She said, "That's right. I have got to solve this. I'm on your side." So, we talked to the Foreign Minister, and we said, "Look, this has to be stopped. We have lost so many of our bright young women diplomats because they opted to resign and follow their spouses. Some are married to your diplomats in Singapore, by the way. So, they opted to follow them. I said, "No, I'm going to pursue my career." The reason for this being, "Well, you'll have problems, because he won't be able to follow." I said, "That's a second problem."

The first issue here is to be able to be married and have a family. The second choice of where to live and what to do is our choice. It's not the government's choice. Of course, you have to follow the rules. If he says he cannot go with you to Romania, or to Hungary, that's his problem, but not the government's problem. In the end, I had to go to New York

to see the Foreign Minister, because he was there for a UN (United Nations) meeting. He must have said, "This woman will not stop...is not giving up." So, he said, "Well, young lady, our concern is about the security clearance of your husband-to-be." I said, "Oh, what kind of a clearance do you want?" He said, "Is there somebody who can tell us that he is clear, or...?" I said, "We are all security risks. Circumstances make people security risks. But if you want a piece of paper to say this, fine." So, I asked my husband, and of course, he's German. He said, "What? Of course, I'm not a security risk." I said, "I know that, but they need a piece of paper, and they need somebody to attest to that. Let's compromise, let's follow what they want." I said, "Who do you know?" He said, "Oh well, you know Rudiger is an old friend, he took over my job." I said, "Who is Rudiger?" He's now the President of the UN General Assembly. That's one of the reasons we went to New York. He said, "Rudiger, Philippine Government needs a letter saying that I am clear." He said, "Oh, that's no problem. Here it is." So...

00:16:25

[Donna Cheng](#)

So that's how you became a precedent. After you, everyone else could?

00:16:28

[Delia Albert](#)

Of course, Everyone else could. What was tricky, the department said that this was an exception, that it's... I said, "No." I don't fight for exceptions. I fight for the principle that any woman should be able to marry whoever she wants and stay in the service unless there is something very, very untoward that makes anyone decide that this is not good for the service.

00:17:01

[Donna Cheng](#)

That was awesome. So, it wasn't just a love story, right?

00:17:06

[Delia Albert](#)

No!

00:17:06

[Donna Cheng](#)

It was a love story plus a principle. So, you're a real champion for gender equality. What are some issues you think today that are still prevalent, or that still needs to be fought? On the front of leadership perhaps.

00:17:21

[Delia Albert](#)

Leadership. When I got home, and I returned home after I retired, and I was told to continue serving the country. Where do you start? I started with a newspaper. I saw in the newspaper, the story of four women, who were CEOs (Chief Executive Officers) of car companies in the Philippines. I said, "Wow! This is great. I want to meet all of them." So, I invited them to lunch, and we had lunch. The lunch started at twelve and ended at three or four o'clock. I said, "I'm so happy for all of you that you... but you know," I said, "Ladies, the world doesn't know about you. The world knows a different picture about the Filipino woman, that the Filipino woman is ready to be subservient all the time, and sometimes taken advantage of, and I have met a lot of these cases. But I want to show the half full glass, and I want the world to know about you." I tell you, they had wonderful ideas how to do it. So, today from that group, and another group that was thinking the same way in another part of town, we got together and the team of four, five, is now a team of forty-five. Forty-five women CEOs. I said, "I know that you're doing very well here, but the world doesn't know about you. I'm very familiar with the world, I have been to fifty-eight countries in my life as a diplomat. So people don't hear about you." There is a World Economic Forum Gender Equality Index that ranks the Philippines very highly. But how many people read that, or know about it? What they see is what they experience on a day to day basis. So, I said, "I want you to be the other face that I would like people to know about the country."

00:19:16

[Donna Cheng](#)

So, you are doing this... so people will have a... to understand Philippines a bit deeper, a bit more...

00:19:23

[Delia Albert](#)

...more balanced picture. Since I formed this group, I have been asked to speak to schools, and to motivate the young women. Not just to be resigned to do very menial things, but to aspire to do more. To get more educated, to learn skills. I have seen these at work in some of our posts where like in Dubai, a lot of the first group of women that went there, they were all low paying jobs. But, for them it's better than paying jobs at home, because then they're able to send back home, etcetera. But people forget the social costs of this, of

families being separated. I have seen that so closely in all my postings. So, we had a team of wonderful young women in Dubai, and there were two or three sisters, who were lawyers etcetera, but they were doing menial jobs. So, I said, "What can we do?" They said, "Add skills. Computer." So, what did they do? I established a halfway house for women, who were not treated well, and who had nothing to do. I said, "Computer learning. You have had basic education, you can learn the computer." This was about twenty years ago. Can you imagine, today many of them who started there, are secretaries to big companies? First, because they know English. Second, because they're computer literate. This is something that I think that technology has helped a lot. Can you imagine if, like this, in Australia, where I was ambassador, and this young woman marries somebody digging in the mines. She thought he was a real super miner. She ended up cleaning the airport in an old hick town somewhere. But she learned to type the computer, she was a school teacher. She had the basic education that could be supplemented by some technical knowledge. Twenty years later to the date that she started as a cleaning woman in the bathroom of the small airport, she became the airport manager. Those stories, I tell women around when, whom I meet and said, "Don't resign yourself to this. There's more to life than doing these things. Of course, you can do it. But if you want to move ahead..."

00:22:11

[Donna Cheng](#)

If you have a desire, don't stop yourself. So that's your message really, for women? When you fight for gender equality, it's really about not holding yourself back?

00:22:21

[Delia Albert](#)

Not holding yourself back. The world has so many opportunities there. But you have to gear yourself towards improving yourself.

00:22:35

[Donna Cheng](#)

What are some of the key issues that women leaders need to fight, or need to work on, say, moving forward? We have come a long way from where you talked about.

00:22:44

[Delia Albert](#)

What I found very interesting when I formed this group of women CEOs? Every one of them were prepared to do mentoring, which is sharing. We go to schools, and invite young

people to sit together, but not just women, we include the men so that they understand what's going in the minds of their counterparts. I always say include... be inclusive.

00:23:18

[Donna Cheng](#)

So, from championing gender inequality and women's issues, the other thing you talked about earlier is ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).

00:23:25

[Delia Albert](#)

Yes. One of my favourite subject. I started my career in 1967. I can be as... I'm as old as ASEAN in the foreign service, yes.

00:23:36

[Donna Cheng](#)

Yes. So as a leader, someone who has been in the diplomatic core, what do you think is critical as a leader, when you're leading an organisation, or a country? What kind of stand, what drives you to make a certain stand, and to say...?

00:23:49

[Delia Albert](#)

I think like in any leadership situation, you have to be a credible person. People rally around you, if you are a person of credibility, of integrity. To me, those are very essential. Leaders also have to be flexible in a way that you can understand why people behave the way they do, or people adopt the policies that they do, but it doesn't mean that you accept that. But you have to be flexible enough to make room. This is the Asian way. We make room to understand this, and to avoid... We mitigate conflict, rather than perhaps, address the conflict. So, that may be cynical again, but that's how I see it. [Both laugh] We mitigate. We try to avoid these situations.

00:24:51

[Donna Cheng](#)

A blowout. Or, confrontation, right?

00:24:52

[Delia Albert](#)

Yes, and to avoid. To me, this has been what has kept ASEAN going.

00:24:59

[Donna Cheng](#)

Even if it takes longer.

00:25:01

[Delia Albert](#)

Even if it takes longer. You see the result, this is a region of prosperity. The peace and stability that we have attained all these years gave us the possibility to improve, at least a great number of the lives of the people in the region. Perhaps not everybody, there are still many lagging behind, but we should not also fall into this situation that we are pulled back, but instead bring up those who are lagging behind.

00:25:37

[Donna Cheng](#)

We have talked about your careers and the many things that you have done. I'm sure there were challenges in there, really difficult moments. What was a key challenge that you faced?

00:25:51

[Delia Albert](#)

As Foreign Minister, the biggest issue that I had to deal with was to save a life. We had a Filipino truck driver in Iraq. One morning at 3 am, the President calls me and says, "Delia, you have to come to the palace because there's a Filipino truck driver who's going to be beheaded in twelve hours, if we do not withdraw the forty-eight-military people in Iraq." We were part of the Coalition of the Willing. When the US (United States) and Britain organised this COWs, they call it the Coalition of the Willing. So, we sent 200 troops and they're supposed to be civilian troops, but they're troops anyway. After some months, we will start withdrawing them. This was a month and a half before the whole programme would finish. So, there were forty-eight left.

00:26:59

[Donna Cheng](#)

Sure.

00:27:00

[Delia Albert](#)

What the people who took this man as a hostage said, "We will release him only if you withdraw your troops from Iraq." It was a very unpopular decision anyway. People didn't want to send troops. But it was a political commitment to... allies, you know how it is. But it was forty-eight men, and a month and a half before they would really leave. This man was put on television. They will cut his head on television to warn everybody to get out of Iraq. I rushed to the palace, 3 am, and brought my crisis team together. We drafted, if we do this, this is the consequence. If we don't do this, this is the consequence. So, we presented to the President. Time was ticking.

00:28:04

[Donna Cheng](#)

Three o'clock, five o'clock.

00:28:05

[Delia Albert](#)

So, we had those, a.m. The President left the room. I said, "Madam President, these are the choices." But it needs the decision of the President and the security group that was gathered there. She disappeared. She came back and she said, "Option this, we save him." I said, "Madam President, how?" The big decision she made was because we were being criticised. Australia said we had a marshmallow foreign policy. We yield to these people. But Filipinos would go to the streets if we said, "Go ahead, kill him." So, we started the negotiations. Australia comes with a "Philippines foreign policy is marshmallow foreign policy". US said something else. I said, I called the US ambassador, "Mr Ambassador, remember we are independent country. You must respect our sovereign decision. Whatever we decide, it's a sovereign decision." [He said,] this will unwind the Coalition of the Willing, etcetera, etcetera. I said, "Sorry, this is one time we have, this is the decision." So, I went on television because we don't know who the hostage takers were. They would only communicate by television. I was the only one they would... I was introduced to talk to them. So that was tough. I said, "Do not do it in twelve hours. We cannot do this in twelve hours. We have to stagger." Then they came back, and they said, it took some time and they said, "Alright, as long as you get them out." But in the meantime, I had to develop my support links, and there's so much in you that comes out. But in the end, I think your stamina, your clearness of mind, your determination comes out, your sense of humanity comes out. So much of it, of you, comes out. How you would handle this, there are no textbooks to guide you, but you are there to save this man. When I got him out, I was physically, mentally, emotionally exhausted.

00:30:56

[Donna Cheng](#)

But that's also the very essence of what leadership is, isn't it? That you affect lives.

00:31:03

[Delia Albert](#)

And your sense of... to me, it was a sense of humanity, that you put in all of yourself to it. Yes., but at the same time, you're grateful for what has built you up. What was for me, also important, was a call from our Ambassador in Brussels. Congratulating me that this thing, and he said, "Do you know Ambassador?" "It's Madam Secretary," I said. "That when you decided to save him, there was a meeting of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). They were worried that it will bring everything out. They asked the American sitting

there, and they said, 'What do you think about the Philippines withdrawing?' He said, 'Well, they made a sovereign decision, and we should respect it.'" I said, "Hey! That sounds familiar!" This is what I tell my young diplomats, I said, "You must know your position well, and you must be able to articulate it well, and you must be convinced. Otherwise, you will lose your way."

Digital Narratives of Asia	1	Delia Albert
	SMU Classification: Restricted	